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AUTHOR Lerma, Sheila; Downs, A. Chris
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ABSTRACT

The extent to which children evaluated non-television advertisements differentially on the basis of performers' gender, expertise, and attractiveness was assessed. Participating were 56 girls and 47 boys attending first-, third-, and fifth-grade classes in Galveston, Texas. A total of 24 pairs of specially prepared advertisements were used as stimulus materials. On each pair, identical pictures of neutral products were shown; pairs varied in the gender, attractiveness, and expertise of the male or female models appearing with the product. Performer's expertise was indicated by a simple sentence included in the advertising copy. Results of chi-square and Z tests indicated that children's selections among advertisements were primarily influenced by the attractiveness of the adult models who appeared. Expertise seemed fairly unimportant to children's judgments. The strength of selecting attractive models across the grades was essentially equivalent. It was concluded that even first graders apparently prefer attractive adult models and that the role of non-television media in attractiveness-based socialization may be extremely important. (RH)

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Does Expertise or Pretty Please? The Influence of Attractiveness, Gender and Expertise on Children's Evaluations of Models in Advertisements

Sheila Lerma and A. Chris Downs
University of Houston at Clear Lake City

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The average American is confronted with approximately 1,000 advertisements per week on billboards, magazines, newspapers, radios and so on. Children are certainly not immune from this bombardment. From "Crunchy Wheats" to "Pac-Man" to "frisbees", children are frequently exposed to advertisements. From a social network perspective, then, advertisements would seem to be a likely source of attractiveness-based socialization. And, thus, our focus in this paper will be the advertisements found on <u>non-television</u> media.

Obviously, advertisements are designed to sell goods and services. Advertising research suggests, however, that the worth of goods and services may not be all that is communicated to the target audience. For instance, while selling laundry detergent, an ad may also link women and housekeeping. Or, while selling beer, men and macho race car driving may be associated, and so on.

Clearly, attractiveness stereotypes may be one of the additional messages communicated along with the advertised goods and services. Indeed, it would seem likely that if you wish to sell a car, your ad would associate the car with an attractive

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model. If an unattractive person appeared in the same ad, she or he would most certainly be driving the competitor's lemon, an edsel or worse! Advertisements, then, most likely convey attractiveness messages by associating highly attractive models with supposedly superior, high-quality goods and services.

Only a couple of previous studies have examined the influence of attractiveness of models on evaluations of the ads in which they appear. And, these studies have focused exclusively on adults, not children. Baker and Churchill (1977) discovered that adults rate advertisements as more convincing and interesting when the ads contained attractive, compared with unattractive, models. Other studies of communicator persuasiveness with adults also reveal that a target audience is much more likely to believe and agree with an attractive, rather than unattractive, communicator (Chaiken, 1979). This research suggests, then, that among adults the attractiveness of an ad's models actually mediates the adults' responsivity to the ad's message.

Other research with adults suggests, however, that both the gender and perceived expertise of models have importance in an ad's effectiveness. Indeed, a couple of studies with adults have discovered that gender, expertise and attractiveness <u>all</u> influence evaluations of models in advertisements.

Our concern in the present study was the extent to which <u>children</u> evaluate advertisements differentially on the basis of gender, expertise and attractiveness of the models in the ads. In terms of the social network perspective this study addresses

both the child and the non-television media in the influence of the media on the child. That is, the extent to which the child differentially values attractive, compared with unattractive ad models, is an index of both the ad's effectiveness on children, and thus the socialization of attractiveness by the ad media, and the child's ability to view attractiveness-affiliated messages as irrelevant to the ad's content.

Our sample included 56 girls and 47 boys drawn from first, third and fifth grade classes in a medium-size elementary school in Galveston. Distribution of children across the three grades was roughly equivalent. The children represented low to middle-income homes and black, chicano and white ethnic backgrounds.

Twenty-four pairs of advertisements were used as stimulus materials. The ads were prepared especially for the study and had not been seen previously by the children. On each ad pair, identical pictures of neutral products were shown. The products included TV sets, air conditioners, shoes and so on. The ad pairs varied, however, in the gender, attractiveness and expertise of the model appearing with the product. Thus, for gender comparisons, the ad pairs contained two male, two female or a male and a female model. The models were also either very attractive or very unattractive. The attractiveness levels were determined prior to the study by separate groups of adult and child judges. Only models in the original, large,

pool of models who were judged highest or lowest in attractiveness were retained for use in the ads. Inter-judge reliability for the original attractiveness ratings was quite high with a range of from .69-.93 across pairs of raters. The ad pairs also varied in expertise associated with models. Expertise was indicated in the ad copy by phrases such as "I make watches for a living. This brand is the best you can buy." Such a statement would be associated with an expert. In comparison, a non-expert would say "This is a nice watch. This brand is the best you can buy". The ad copy included two simple sentences, the first indicating expertise and the second the pitch to buy. The second sentence was identical for all ad pairs. Attractiveness, expertise and gender were all varied across ads. Models in ads were very carefully matched in age, apparel, facial expressions, hair color and size and color of the picture. All models were white.

The children were tested in groups with each grade done on a separate day. The experimenter first explained what an advertisement was and told the children that she was interested in their opinion of certain products. She explained that they would be shown two ads at a time and would be asked to put an "X" in the box of the product that they liked the best. The first ad of each pair was box #1 and the second ad of each pair was box #2. Order of presentation was alternated to avoid left-right preferences. After making sure that the instructions were understood, the 28 pairs of ads were presented with the children reminded after viewing each pair to put their

mark in box #1 or box #2. The copy on each ad was read aloud to the children by the experimenter. A second experimenter mingled among the children to make sure they understood the instructions and that children were marking the boxes appropriately. After all the ads were shown, the two experimenters collected each response sheet individually and coded each child on her or his sex and ethnicity.

The data were analyzed by chi-square tests and Z tests for differences in the proportions of children choosing models on the basis of gender, attractiveness and expertise.

Attractiveness

The results for attractiveness comparisons were very straightforward. When only the attractiveness of the models varied, and gender and expertise were held constant for each ad pair, children nearly always selected ads containing attractive models. Further, these selections were similar across both gender and grade of children.

Gender

Gender of the models also mediated children's selections, but in an unexpected manner. When both the male and female were attractive, children selected the females. When both were unattractive, children selected the males. And, again, the results were fairly similar across grade and sex of children. Apparently, children prefer attractive women over attractive men and unattractive men over unattractive women. Indeed, perhaps children see greater variability in the attractiveness levels of women than men.

Expertise

In comparing models who varied only in expertise, we were surprised to discover that expertise did not influence children's selections when the models were women. When the models were men, attractive non-experts were selected more than attractive experts, while unattractive experts were selected over unattractive non-experts. In other words, the expertise of females in the ads seemed irrelevant to children's judgments. When two males were paired, however, attractiveness mediated the influence of expertise-- pairs of attractive men led to the selection of the non-expert; pairs of unattractive men led to the selection of the expert.

Attractiveness X Gender

When both the attractiveness and gender of the model varied between ad pairs, children almost routinely selected the attractive model, regardless of the sex of the model. Again, these findings held across both grade and sex of children.

Attractiveness X Expertise

Moreover, when sex was held constant and both the attractiveness and expertise varied between models, the attractive model of the pair was far more likely than the unattractive model to be selected, regardless of the expertise of the individuals. Apparently, attractiveness is far more important than expertise in children's judgments of ads.

Gender X Expertise

When attractiveness was held constant and both gender and expertise varied between ad pairs, the overall majority of children selected the female over the male, regardless of expertise. However, this finding was true only among the first and third graders. Among fifth graders differences in selection were absent on the basis of either gender or expertise.

Attractiveness X Expertise X Gender

For pairs in which gender, expertise and attractiveness varied, attractiveness again provided the basis for most selections. Children, especially in the younger two grades, tended to prefer attractive rather than unattractive models, regardless of the gender or expertise of the models.

For clarity, let's summarize the findings:

1. Attractive models were almost always prefered over unattractive models and this was true whether or not gender or expertise were entered as variables in the ads.
2. In comparisons of male and female models, males were prefered when unattractive while females were preferred when the models were attractive. Further, these differences were generally unaffected by expertise of the models.
3. Finally, when expertise was examined, expertise was irrelevant when the models were women, but became important among male models. That is, attractive male nonexperts were prefered over attractive male experts. Unattractive male nonexperts were less preferred

than unattractive male experts.

These results indicate, rather clearly, that children's selections among ads are primarily influenced by the attractiveness of the adult models appearing in the ads. Expertise, while presented in very clear, understandable terms to children, seemed fairly unimportant to children's judgments.

We were fairly surprised to note the general consistency in responding across grades. Indeed, the strength of selecting attractive models across the grades was essentially equivalent. Apparently, even the youngest children in our study, first graders, are already prefering attractive adult models. Ostensibly this translates into a message for children that positive, good, products are associated with attractive models while unattractive models are associated with less desirable products.

In sum, a comparison of attractiveness, gender and expertise of models in ads strongly suggests a salient role for attractiveness in children's preferences for ads. Indeed, expertise seems irrelevant while pretty pleases. The role of non-TV media in attractiveness-based socialization may be an extremely important one and should certainly receive additional empirical attention.